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Hearing on Developments in China’s Military Force projection and Expeditionary Capabilities

Introduction:

I define expeditionary operations as:

Military operations abroad. They are executed by military forces specifically trained and equipped to fight a long distance from home.

Hence, Chinese expeditionary capabilities are forces optimized for use beyond the second island chain...the distant seas. These forces can also be used in near seas operations.

The Chinese have coined a term to characterize a distant seas combat mission; as opposed to a peacetime MOOTW mission. It is called “open seas protection.”

For purposes of clarity, I judge that:

“Open seas protection” = expeditionary missions

The Demand Signal

Beijing has been remarkably transparent in disclosing its expeditionary ambitions. Ambitions dictated by the perceived need to protect China’s sea lanes and its many political and economic overseas interests—including of course the hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens working or travelling abroad.

This was explicitly spelled out in the latest (2015) Chinese defense white paper entitled *China’s Military Strategy*.¹ According to the white paper²:

With the growth of China’s national interests...the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue. ...

In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense and open seas protection, the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually shift its focus from “offshore waters

¹ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>

² Ibid, 3, 8, 9

defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” with “open seas protection,” and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.

It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.

Very Important Guidance related to Expeditionary Operations

The White Paper announces that “the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually *shift its focus from* ‘offshore waters defense’ (geographically near seas) to *the combination of* ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection,’ (a new term; geographically far seas) and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.”³ This is very significant. This passage suggests that protecting overseas interests and sea lanes is becoming as important to China’s leadership as defending China itself. It is too soon to judge if the overseas interests alluded to in the white paper could be characterized as another of China’s “core” interests; but in terms of PLA strategic thinking it is clear that they are very significant—strategically significant to be sure, but also significant because of the budgetary implications associated with procurement and fielding of new capabilities.

While expeditionary operations are likely to affect all of the PLA military branches (accept perhaps the new Rocket Force), I will focus on the PLAN because of the importance the white paper placed on protecting sea lanes. The nature of this emphasis is new and is different than the now almost decade old guidance found in earlier white papers that was focused on the *peacetime* uses of the navy. To capture the concept of peacetime operations, the PLA borrowed an old U.S. military acronym—MOOTW (military operations other than war).⁴ China’s 2008 Defense White Paper described MOOTW as playing an important role for China’s armed forces, and noted that the PLA is developing MOOTW capabilities.⁵

In the 2015 white paper the enumeration of peacetime MOOTW missions no longer includes any reference to sea lanes upon which China relies. These are addressed in separate sections within the context of “protection,” which suggests to me that thinking regarding open seas has shifted from conceptually framing those operations as strictly peacetime, to a broader framework that takes into account having to protect “strategic SLOCS” in wartime. This has obvious long-term implications for expeditionary operations in general and PLAN force structure in particular since protecting crucial sea lanes which originate at the Indian Ocean’s far western reaches requires a

³ Ibid., p. 8

⁴ *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War*, (Joint Pub 3-07), 16 June 1995, http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3_07.pdf

⁵ Information Office of the State Council, *China’s National Defense in 2008*, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577.htm

mix of ships, aircraft and submarines that can credibly accomplish such a mission thousands of miles from Chinese territory.

“Open Seas Protection”... on the road to a global navy

It is important to appreciate that “open seas protection” did not materialize overnight; it rather represents the latest iteration in Chinese thinking about how to use of the PLAN beyond China’s seaward approaches. It can be traced in official pronouncements to 2004⁶ when the PLA was for the first time assigned responsibilities well beyond China and proximate waters. This was official recognition that China’s national interests now extended beyond its borders; and that the PLA’s missions were to be based on those expanding interests, not just geography.⁷ For instance, the 2008 Defense White Paper states that China continues to develop its ability to conduct “offshore” operations *while gradually building its ability to conduct operations in “distant seas.”*⁸

The “open seas protection” mission also makes sense within the context of Xi’s much-ballyhooed 21st Century Maritime Silk Road that will run from China’s major ports through Indonesian Straits, then along the Indian Ocean’s northern littoral, grazing East Africa, before transiting the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Eastern Mediterranean. This “road” is already heavily travel by China’s shipping, but if promised Chinese investments in infrastructure along the route actually come true, the need to look after those investments will also grow.

Finally, we cannot overlook the influence of outside voices have had on the generation of the “open seas protection” mission. If China has had doubts regarding dependence of its economy, and as result the survival of the regime, on its sea lanes, that uncertainty has long since been removed by a number of Western “strategists” writing that in time of conflict the way to bring China to its knees is to cut its sea lanes.⁹

The PLA Navy “Open Seas Protection” is Already Being Built

⁶ Hu Jintao, “Understand the New Historic Missions of our Military in the New Period of the New Century,” available on the National Defense Education website of Jiangxi Province, <http://gfjy.jiangxi.gov.cn/yl.asp?did+11349.htm>

⁷ The *New Historic Missions* speech triggered a discussion among Chinese strategists in and out of uniform over security interests well beyond China’s near seas. The geographical characterization of this emerging issues was *yuanhai* in Chinese, translated as either “open seas” or “distant seas” The term *yuanhai* can also be translated as “distant oceans.” Some English sources translate the term as “blue water”.

⁸ *China’s National Defense in 2008* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2009). (Emphasis added) , available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577.htm

⁹ See for example, Douglas C. Peifer, “China, the German Analogy, and the New Air-Sea Operational Concept,” *Orbis*, Vol.55, No.1, Winter 2001, T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict,” *Strategic Forum* 278 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2012), Geoff Dyer, *The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition with China and How America Can Win*, (New York, Knopf, 2014), Chapter 2, and Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Blockade of China,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 36, No 3, 2013.

China does not need a “distant seas” navy to execute a near seas A2/AD operation, but it does if it hopes to accomplish the mission set associated with open seas protection.¹⁰ This requires a different mix of naval capabilities than needed for wartime defense of China proper. Far seas operations demand multi-product logistics support ships, amphibious ships with helicopter facilities, larger multi-mission destroyers and frigates with better endurance, reliable propulsion systems, helicopter facilities, improved anti-submarine systems, and especially longer-range air defenses. Submarines have an important role to play. Nuclear power attack submarines (SSN) are best suited for far seas deployments because of their endurance, but even in this case, as the USN has long realized, a submarine tender forward deployed in Guam or Diego Garcia is a necessary logistic requirement for support and repair when SSNs are on sustained deployments thousands of miles from a traditional support base.

Lacking land-based air cover, a credible distant seas navy must be able to defend itself from air attack. Destroyers with long-range surface-to-air missiles can accomplish where the air threat is limited, but most of China’s most important SLOCs—e.g., in the Northern Arabian Sea/Gulf of Aden—face a more substantial air threat. I believe this was a very important (although not the only) factor in the China’s decision to build a modest aircraft carrier force.¹¹ Although the ski-jump take-off used on *Liaoning* imposes weight penalties on the type and amount of ordnance the aircraft can launch with, its jets can provide PLAN open seas protection operations air cover. Looking ahead, all indications are that around the years 2020-22, the PLAN will likely operate two *Liaoning*-style aircraft carriers.

The air wing is, of course, the reason for an aircraft carrier. Details regarding the composition of *Liaoning*’s air wing remain sketchy, probably because the PLAN itself has not finally decided. Informed speculation suggests the air wing will include, 24 J-15 fighters, 4-6 ASW helicopters, four helicopters dedicated to airborne early warning (putting an air-search radar in the sky), and two helicopters dedicated to pilot rescue during flight operations (“plane guard” in USN-speak).¹²

The backbone of these “distant seas” forces will be the multi-mission *Luyang* II/III (type 052C and 052D) class destroyers (DDG). They are likely to form the bulk of the warship escorts for *Liaoning*, any follow-on carriers, and expeditionary amphibious forces. These 8000 ton destroyers are also formidable warships when operating independently; they are roughly the size of the US DDG-51 class, and will have phased-array radars and a long-range SAM system which provides the PLAN with its first credible *area* air-defense capability (the ability to defend more than just oneself). Because these ships are fitted with a multi-purpose 64-cell vertical launch system, they will also be able to load land-attack cruise missiles.

¹⁰ Needed capabilities shift to surface ships rather than land-based air and submarines, although recent PLAN submarine deployments to the Indian Ocean do indicate that submarines, especially nuclear powered attack submarines (SSN) and modern AIP equipped conventional submarines also factor into PLAN calculations regarding open seas protection. For an Indian perspective see, P.K. Ghosh, “Game Changers? Chinese Submarines in the Indian Ocean,” *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/game-changers-chinese-submarines-in-the-indian-ocean/>

¹¹ Li, Nan and Christopher Weuve, “China’s Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: An Update,” *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2010, p. 15. www.usnwc.edu/publications/Naval-War-College-Review/2010---Winter.aspx

¹² <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/chinas-got-an-aircraft-carrier-what-about-the-air-wing-c95283bc0279>

On paper, these are state of the art multi-mission warships; the phased array radar, also known as active electronically scanned array (AESA), is similar in technical approach to the radar in the USN-developed AEGIS combat system. When combined with long-range surface-to-air missiles housed in vertical launch cells, this radar system provides the ship with tremendous anti-air firepower—the ability to engage multiple targets simultaneously. These types of destroyers are expensive warships to build; only a few navies in the world can afford them. For example, Japan has six, and by 2020 will have eight; whereas today China already has ten built or building, and by 2020 will likely have 18-20.¹³

If the Type 052D is intended as the backbone, the Type 054A guided-missile frigate (FFG) has for the past six years been the workhorse the PLAN far seas anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and follow-on presence operations spanning the Indian Ocean littoral, Eastern Mediterranean, and Black Sea. At 4,100 tons, this large frigate is well-armed with long-range ASCMs, a 32-cell VLS launcher with medium-range SAMs, and a helicopter with hanger. Their ASW suite is likely to be improved with the addition of a towed array and variable-depth sonar that is already being fitted on China's Type 56 corvettes.¹⁴ China operates 17 of these ships today, and by 2020 is expected to have approximately 24 Type 54A and around 6 of improved Type 054B frigates in commission.

The PLAN has mastered the logistics of sustaining small task groups on distant stations. The advantage of a state-owned enterprise that is in the logistics services business worldwide (COSCO) means that China enjoys built-in shore-based support structure at virtually all the major ports along the Pacific and Indian Oceans. When combined with its modern multi-product replenishment ships that have developed significant skill in at sea support; this has become a successful approach to logistic sustainment halfway around the world from Chinese homeports. One of the main lessons the PLAN has learned from its anti-piracy deployments is the absolute importance of having enough multi-purpose replenishment ships. American experts have long opined that the most important indication of PLAN out of area ambitions would be construction of replenishment ships. That is exactly what China is doing. PLAN inventory of 22,000-ton *Fuchi*-class AORs is being increased to seven today, with as many as 10 major replenishment ships probably operating by 2020, more than enough to support continuous far seas operations in addition to the counter-piracy patrols.¹⁵

For years, the focus on PLAN amphibious shipping has focused on assessing the PLA's ability to invade Taiwan. While that contingency requires continued attention; the PLAN is in the process of assembling an impressive "far seas" expeditionary capability. It now has four 20,000-ton amphibious ships classified as LPDs (Type 071). Each ship can embark between 800-1,000

¹³ ONI, *The PLA Navy*, p15-16, Andrew Tate, "China Commissions second Type 052D DDG, pushes ahead with frigate, corvette launches, *IHS Jane's 360*, 21 July 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/53139/china-commissions-second-type-052d-ddg-pushes-ahead-with-frigate-corvette-launches> and Deagel.com Type 052D http://www.deagel.com/Destroyers-and-Cruisers/Type-052D_a001828004.aspx

¹⁴ Andrew Tate, "China commissions fourth ASW-capable Type 056 corvette," IHS Jane's Navy International, ,Janes <http://www.janes.com/article/51341/china-commissions-fourth-asw-capable-type-056-corvette>

¹⁵ Bernard D. Cole, "China's navy expands it replenishment-at-sea capability," *The Interpreter*, 26 August 2015, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/08/26/Chinas-Navy-Expands-Replenishment-Capability.aspx>

marines or soldiers; four air-cushion landing craft and several helicopters. Forecasts suggest even more of these ships as well as perhaps a larger LHA type ship will be built.¹⁶

China's submarine force has correctly been seen as primarily focused on "near seas defense." As mentioned nuclear powered attack submarines (SSN) are considered the most suitable type of submarine for long-range, long-endurance out of area operations for any navy. The PLAN has long had a small SSN force, but in the past few years China has created a modern SSN force of six Shang-class (Type 093) boats, and is expected to introduce a new class that could result in a 2020 inventory of 7-8 SSNs, which would exceed the United Kingdom and French SSN forces and place China third globally in operational nuclear powered attack submarines, behind the United States and Russia.

The PLAN's most modern conventionally powered submarine is the AIP-equipped Yuan-class (Type 039A/B).¹⁷ It has been in series production since 2004, with as many as 20 expected by 2020. Conventionally-powered submarines would not normally be considered as capabilities associated with Chinese "open seas protection" missions because of their important role in A2/AD, except for the fact that this large conventional submarine was sent to the Indian Ocean, calling at Karachi, Pakistan in April 2015. This was the third submarine the PLAN has deployed to the Indian Ocean in the past two years; the earlier deployments were by a Type 093 class SSN and a Song class conventional boat; much to Indian observers' dismay.¹⁸ These deployments, a sort of proof of concept operation, suggest that PLAN submarines may also be earmarked for routine far seas operations just as the Soviet Navy did when it maintained routine submarine presence in the Northern Arabian Sea during the final decade of the Cold War.¹⁹

It is important to emphasize how essential seven-plus years of uninterrupted anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Sea have been in teaching the PLAN how to conduct distant seas operations. One reason they have learned so quickly is because the anti-piracy patrols are a real world "battle-laboratory."²⁰

Looking Ahead: World's Second Largest Distant Seas Navy by 2020

To help to appreciate the magnitude of PLAN's development of "open ocean protection" capabilities, it is useful to compare them to the other "great" navies of the world. **Exhibit 1** is a forecast that attempts to compare ships with the capabilities necessary to conduct sustained deployments very far away from waters. This specifically compares the PLA Navy classes of ships discussed in the preceding section with ships of similar capabilities from other navies routinely operating in far seas. This comparison is NOT intended to be an order of battle

¹⁶ Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*, Washington DC, p. 18.

¹⁷ Christopher P. Carlson, "Essay: Inside the Design of China's Yuan-class submarine," USNI News, August 31, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/08/31/essay-inside-the-design-of-chinas-yuan-class-submarine>

¹⁸ DOD, *Annual Report 2015*, 19 and Rajat Pandit, "Chinese submarine in Karachi, India alarmed," The Times of India, June, 27, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-submarine-in-Karachi-India-alarmed/articleshow/47845930.cms>

¹⁹ Need foot note on Sov out of area submarine deployments.

²⁰ Michael McDevitt, 'PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners,' p 102, in Roy Kamphausen, et al, *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pa, 2012, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub1135.pdf>

inventory where every ship of every class is counted; rather it is an attempt to be a comparison of Chinese “far seas” apples to other nations “far seas” apples, projected to around the year 2020.

Exhibit 1: Far Seas Navies’ Major Ships ca. 2020²¹

	PLA Navy	UK	France	Japan	India	Russia
Carriers	2	2	1	0	2	1
Aegis-like Destroyer	18-20	6-8	2	8	5-6	0
Modern high end Frigate	30-32	1-2	6 (FREMM)	4	3-10	9-11
Large Amphibious	6-7	6	3	3	0-3	0
AOR	8-10	3	4	5	0-3	4 very old
SSN SS (AIP)	6-7 20	7	6	0 22	1-2 6	8-9 +6 SSGN 9-11
SSBN	5-6	4	4	0	1-2	10-12

For perspective, **Exhibit 2** also compares the PLAN classes that have been discussed with similar classes in the United States Navy. Again, this is NOT on “order of battle” ship counting exercise, it is an attempt to show that while the PLAN’s far seas capabilities are very impressive when measured against the rest of the world, there is still no comparison when measured against America’s far seas naval forces. But, all of China’s ships are homeported in East Asia whereas most the US Navy is homeported thousands of miles away. There is little doubt that by the beginning of the next decade the PLAN will have a substantial capability advantage in East Asia. When one combines the forces of Japan and the U.S. Seventh Fleet a rough equivalency in “far seas” ships will exist. However, a contribution from Japan is not assured in contingencies when the security of Japan is not directly threatened.

Exhibit 2: Major Far Seas Ships ca. 2020, PLAN vs. USN

	USN Overall	PLAN Far Seas	US 7 th Fleet	Japan
Carriers	11	2	1 to 1.5	0

²¹ AEGIS like DDGs include UK Type 045 Daring class, the French Horizon class, the Japanese Kongo and Atago classes, and the Indian Kolkata and Visakhapatnam classes.

Aegis-like destroyer	88-91	18-20	10	8
Frigate (FFG)	0	30-32	0	4
Large Amphibious ship	33	6-8	3-4	3
AOR (replenishment at sea)	30	8	rotational	5
SSN	48+4 SSGN	6-7	3+rotational	0
Modern SS (AIP)	0	20	0	22
SSBN	14	5-6	0	0

Implications for China

China is constructing a “mini-me” of the United States Navy

Virtually all of the PLAN ships discussed in proceeding paragraphs have been commissioned over the last decade; the obvious conclusion is that China’s “open ocean protection” mission will be executed by a new/modern far seas force. This force, clearly well-balanced across the board in capabilities and ship classes, and increasingly resembles nothing more than a smaller version of the USN.

The question is: will Beijing employ this microcosm of the USN the way Washington uses the USN? So far, trends are moving in that direction. Like the USN, when on distant seas operations the PLAN conducts the whole range of activities associated with what is normally characterized as “peacetime presence”: naval diplomacy, emergency evacuations, disaster relief, and exercises with friendly navies. What has not been seen is traditional power projection—yet. China’s far seas navy is assembling power projection components—carrier air, land attack cruise missiles, and amphibious forces—that are very credible.

China’s global prestige will grow

It is likely that by 2020, China will have the second most capable “distant seas” navy in the world. Certainly in terms of numbers of relevant ship classes it will be in that position. Its “ranking” among the world’s great navies is greatly facilitated by fact that while the PLAN was expanding, virtually all of the other traditional maritime powers were reducing major warship production. Nonetheless, today the PLAN is not only a formidable “near seas” challenge thanks mainly to its submarine contribution to A2/AD operations, it is becoming a well-rounded (balanced) and very capable expeditionary navy. As Xinhua reported on 12 May 2015,

“This is the first time that [China] has conducted naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. It is a new challenge for the Chinese Navy. It also showed that [China] is expanding its national interests and security interests to waters further away from China. People should get used to seeing China’s warships out in the sea.”

China’s ability to militarily influence events abroad (project power) will grow

By 2020 China will have the second-largest modern amphibious capability in the world (after the USN), and could potentially embark at a minimum 5,500-6,500 marines for operations anywhere

in the world. When combined with modern destroyers as escorts and an aircraft carrier to provide air defense, China will have a distant seas power projection capability for the first time since Admiral Zheng He's last voyage (1431-1433).²²

Chinese National expectations—supporting Chinese abroad

Every indication is that the people of China are, and will continue to be, delighted with China's growing global naval capabilities. The Government of China in general and the PLAN in particular have done a terrific job in publicizing the success of counterpiracy operations in protecting China merchant ships or evacuating Chinese nationals from hot spots in the Middle East. The fact that the PLAN was able to help Chinese citizens as well as other foreign nationals, as it did with the Yemen evacuations of civilians in April 2015, or with its counterpiracy operations that provide escort protection to any ships that requests same, highlight the PLA's ability to become a net provider of humanitarian aid in times of crisis.²³

Chinese National expectations—acting like a world power

Recognition of China's status in the world is also an important national expectation. There appears to be a wide spread impression among many Chinese elites that historically major powers have also been maritime powers. Chinese writers note the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal were major powers in the past due to their maritime capabilities. Later powers—Britain, the US, Japan, and for a short period Germany and the Soviet Union, also depended on maritime power.²⁴ While it is important to not over stress this element, it implies that a Chinese expeditionary capability would reinforce perceptions to China is a world power and an actor of consequence on the global stage.

Implications for the United States

Cooperative PLAN operations in CENTCOM, AFRICOM and EUCOM

Seeing Chinese warships in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea is likely to become routine. U.S. Combatant Commanders responsible for those regions may have different perspectives on PLAN presence than their Pacific compatriots, and in some cases (e.g., anti-piracy patrols) welcome PLAN presence.

There may be far more opportunities for USN-PLAN cooperation the farther from China's proximate claims that naval interactions occur; although if Sino-Russian naval activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea assume the appearance of being counter to American interests, that could quickly change.

²² For the most accurate account of Zheng He's "power projection" voyages see Edward Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433*, Pearson, 2006.

²³ Ankit Panda. "China Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen," *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/china-evacuates-foreign-nationals-from-yemen/>

²⁴ Peng Kehui. "Discussing the Historical Evolution of New Chia's Maritime Strategy." *Luelun xin zhongguo haiyang zhanlue de lishi yanjin. Social Sciences Review Shehui Kexue Luntun*, no. 10 (2012); Xu Sheng, "Follow the Path of Maritime Power."

Potential anxiety in India

Certainly, should the PLAN begin to maintain a routine naval presence in the Indian Ocean in addition to its anti-piracy operations that will become even more of a red flag to India than it already is. That will increase the incentives, certainly from Delhi's point of view, for an even closer Indian-American naval relationship. The pace of that relationship will naturally be dictated by the overall state of Sino-Indian relations; but it is conceivable that an increase in PLAN presence, especially submarines, could result in some sort of a combined Indo-U.S. ASW organization dedicated to tracking PLAN submarines in-region.

PLA places and maybe bases along the Indian Ocean Littoral and beyond

Naturally, the potential for PLAN facilities along the Indian Ocean littoral has been an issue of sometimes-heated commentary. Since the PLAN is already evolving toward a “places not bases” approach in the Indian Ocean region; it is not farfetched to speculate that the “open seas protection mission” helps to rationalize Chinese logistics “outposts” in the western portion of the Indian Ocean. A Chinese facility in Djibouti seems to be in the offing,²⁵ and Gwadar, Pakistan is also a possibility.²⁶

Introducing “friction” to U.S. crisis responses

The combination of “places” along with future deployments of PLAN distant seas forces means that in a few years U.S. authorities may no longer be able to assume sea control off Middle East and East African hotspots if Chinese interests are involved, and differ from Washington's.

Impact on global perceptions of US power

The image of a Chinese “global” expeditionary navy could over time attenuate perceptions of American power, especially in maritime regions where only the USN or its friends have operated freely since the end of the Cold War.

Impact on U.S. maritime resources of distant sea SSN and SSBN operations

Closer to home, keeping track of far seas-deployed PLAN submarines could create new capacity challenges for U.S.—especially in U.S. EEZs. During the Cold War a USN that was at least twice the size of today's navy, with almost a third of its force structure dedicated to the primary mission of ASW, invested considerable operational effort into keeping track of Soviet submarines operating near American coasts. Will the U.S. be willing and able to do the same today?

How big will China's “Open Ocean Protection” Navy become?

²⁵ John Lee, “China Comes to Djibouti: Why Washington Should be Worried,” Foreign Affairs Snapshot, April 23, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2015-04-23/china-comes-djibouti>

²⁶ Saibal Dasgupta, “China gets 40-year management rights on Pak's Gwadar port, access to Arabian Sea,” *The Times of India*, April 14, 2015 <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/China-gets-40-year-management-rights-on-Paks-Gwadar-port-and-access-to-Arabian-Sea/articleshow/46923252.cms>, and Angela Yu, China leases 800 ha land at Gwadar port, “IHS Maritime 360, 9 September 2015, <http://www.ihsmaritime360.com/article/19228/china-leases-800-ha-land-at-gwadar-port>

Unlike every other country with a major naval establishment, China is unique in that it does not reveal how many ships and submarines of each class it intends to build. In all other countries with any sort of credible navy this information is available: building warships is expensive, and involves seeking funds from legislative bodies. This process naturally involves public information specifying what a government actually intends to buy.

Because of this lack of Chinese transparency, reaching judgements about the future size and capability of a “far seas” PLA Navy (PLAN) requires a blend of information from: semi-authoritative comments from the Chinese themselves, open-source space-based photography that take photos of Chinese shipyards, and commentary from official U.S. government sources such as the 2015 Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) report on the PLA²⁷ or the Defense Department’s annual reports to Congress on the PLA.²⁸

As a result there is great uncertainty over how large will the “distant seas” PLAN become? If one takes seriously the words in the 18th Party Work report that, “Building strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are *commensurate with China’s international standing* and meet the needs of its security and development interests is a strategic task of China’s modernization drive...” it could become very large indeed.

Several years ago in a paper written for a Naval War College conference I asserted that China was not trying to replicate the Imperial Japanese Navy and build a force aimed at having a climactic battle for sea control somewhere in the Philippine Sea. I still believe this to be true, but the image of a regional navy as capable as the IJN was in 1941—it was a formidable force: 10 battleships; 12 aircraft carriers; 18 heavy cruisers; 20 light cruisers; 126 destroyers; and 68 submarines—reminds us of what an Asian regional navy could become.²⁹

Implications for Congress

If you assume two terms, the next U.S. President will face a challenge last faced by FDR. That challenge is that in times of crisis or conflict of having to actually fight to either gain or maintain sea control along the Pacific or Indian Ocean littorals. Since 1945, the United States has been able to employ its expeditionary capabilities in the pursuit of interests on the far shores of those bodies of water with little or no concern regarding the country’s ability to arrive and stay wherever it thought best, for as long as it thought best. Over the next 8 years this ability will be in jeopardy. Congress needs to get involved in thinking about this future and what to do, if anything, about it.

²⁷ Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*, Washington DC. <https://www.hdiac.org/islandora/object/hdiac%3A328473>, hereafter ONI, *The PLA Navy*.

²⁸ The latest such report is, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, April 2015*, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf

²⁹ David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. U.S. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 1997

